



Strong Press, Contentious Government: a Primer on Post-Transition South Korean Democracy *A SinoNK.com Working Paper*

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Introduction

In the international relations and comparative politics literature covering the postindustrial state period in South Korea, most research efforts have focused on the changing nature of government-society and government-business relations or the ROK-US alliance and regional security issues, especially North-South relations. There is, however, little research covering the nature of government-media relations and their implication for society and the policymaking process. The research presented here seeks to fill, albeit only as a primer, this void in the literature on South Korean politics and society. Overall, this research finds that government-media relations in South Korea are very contentious. The media's antagonistic relationship with the government is underscored by its highly ideological disposition. Though South Korean political parties are nominally "conservative" or "progressive," their lack of institutionalization prevents them from being strongly associated with one or the other ideology; in a country with weak parties and a strong press, the press plays the role traditionally held by political parties of serving as the goal posts around which the conservative and progressive camps rally. This report is laid out as follow: first, an alternative framework for understanding the press' role in South Korean political and society is presented; second, the new framework is applied to the media's coverage of the Sunshine Policy during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung; third, the reaction from Kim Dae-jung is analyzed by way of case study; lastly, the implications of the report's findings are considered in the concluding remarks.

The South Korean Press: Ideologically Motivated, Institutionally Biased

Those coming from a traditional liberal (re: Western) background will find the role of the press and the nature of government-media relations in South Korea fundamentally different and, depending on the degree of affinity for the notion of the press as an institution that checks the excesses of government power (the so-called "fourth estate"), potentially worrying. Overall, the South Korean media, understood here simply as the press (re: newspapers), plays a fundamentally different role in politics and society than its Western counterparts.

The origins of the South Korean press, and their degree of politicization, is worthy of a book-length footnote. A brief summary will have to suffice here. First, the three big conservative



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daily newspapers—the *Chosun Ilbo*, the *Dong-a Ilbo*, and the *JoongAng Ilbo*—have existed longer than South Korea itself. The primary progressive newspaper, the *Hankyoreh*, did not come into existence until 1988, following amendments to press laws and the start of democratic transition in South Korea.¹ Second, much of Korea's political elite has risen to its current position by way of journalism. Many politicians today still boast a background in journalism specifically or mass media more generally.²

Throughout the 20th century, South Korean print media faced a vast array of trials and tribulations stemming from the desire of the state to control the content of what was reported. During the Japanese colonial period and the successive military dictatorships that followed, the state exercised tight control over the print media via censorship, threats, intimidation, legal penalties and closure of media outlets. Even after South Korea's democratic transition in 1987, the media's relationship with the state was unpredictable, and the state could still utilize gray legal areas (especially those relating to national security) and tax audits to pressure, constrain or penalize undesirable coverage.³

Regarding its function in society, the press does not act as an independent check on the government; instead, the press operates as a highly politicized institution more accurately understood as an extension of, rather than separate from, the government. This role stems from the particularly makeup of the current South Korean political system. The press fills a political and social void created as a result of weak party institutionalization. Political parties are, contrary their role and perception in other democratic societies, “seen more as political lackeys [of a political leader] than important articulators of public policy,” according to one respected source.⁴

South Korea, which lacks strong and institutionalized political parties, falls slightly outside of the theoretical framework on liberal, consolidated democracies, regarding government-

¹ For a brief account of the four newspapers identified here within the context of the controversial tax audit, see: Don Kirk, “Media war in South Korea sweeps up ‘Big Three’ newspapers, government,” *International*

² Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies Toward North Korea* (RAND Center for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012), 72. For a few examples of South Korea politicians whose political careers were preceded by stints as journalists, see profiles for Chang Chun-ha, a Korean democracy activist, or Jeon Yeo-ok, who was, before Park Geun-hye took the lime light, the presumed presidential candidate for the New Frontier Party in the 2012 elections.

³ President Kim Young-sam had a tax audit of major media outlets conducted during his presidency, but he refused to release the results to the public, which prompted widespread suspicion of political deal making in which President Kim agreed to keep the results of the audit private in return for more favorable coverage.

⁴ Levin and Han, *Sunshine in Korea*, 72.



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media relations. Whereas political parties in most democracies represent the dominant strands of ideology in society, the main newspapers in Korea play the part of ideological centers, erecting "goal posts around which the conservative and progressive camps, respectively, gather."⁵ Whereas politically active groups in a country like America are commonly seen rallying around the Republican or Democratic Party, one would be hard pressed to find similar groups in South Korea rallying around the New Frontier Party or its liberal counterpart.⁶

Adding to the "goal posts" understanding of the press' role in South Korea, Young Chul Yoon argues, in his article "Power Transition and Press Coverage of Inter-Korean Relations Policy: Press-Party Parallel," that the media's characteristic role is revealed in its coverage of government policy.⁷ By using the *Chosun Ilbo* and the *Hankyoreh* as representatives of the two main press institutions in what he calls the "press-party parallel," Yoon provides a new theoretical framework through which government-media relations in South Korea can be understood. The press-party parallel is used by Yoon, writing during the first half of the Kim Dae-jung administration, to "emphasize the existence of shared political interests between the *Chosun Ilbo* and the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) on one end of the axis and the *Hankyoreh* and the ruling Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) on the other."⁸

Though it is certainly true that all newspapers are politically motivated and biased to some degree, the South Korean press is particularly so. In the American political system, for example, the press, as the so-called "fourth estate" or "fourth branch of government," serving the role of watchdog, checking excesses in government power through investigative journalism and (relatively) unbiased, objective reporting. Take for instance the *Chosun Ilbo's* American

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ One would, however, easily find instances when high-profile politicians (or entrepreneurs) were, outside of the party-framework, able to mobilize millions of voters—a phenomenon known as "personalistic politics." Although the notion that political parties in South Korea have yet to institutionalize is, generally speaking, true, the argument that the conservative party (which is currently the New Frontier Party (NFP) or *Seabury-dang*) has established itself as more than a temporary collection of relatively like-minded politicians has some merit; but only some. If one were to consider the ways in which the NFP differentiates itself, ideologically, from the progressive party (ideological differentiation being a key tenet of institutionalized political parties), one would be hard pressed to come up with more than a few insignificant points of difference.

⁷ Young Chul Yoon, "Power Transition and Press Coverage of Inter-Korean Relations Policy: Press-Party Parallel," *Unron kwa Sahoe* (Media and Society), Vol. 27 (2000): 48-81.

⁸ Yoon, "Power Transition," qtd. In Hong-Won Park, "The Press and the Kim Dae Jung Government's Sunshine Policy: Content Analysis and the *The Chosun Ilbo* and *The Hankyoreh*," in *The Korean Peninsula in Transition: the Summit and its Aftermath* (Seoul: Kyungnam University, 2002), 303.



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equivalent, in terms of readership and scope of coverage, the *New York Times* (NYT). Though a newspaper like the NYT is considered by many to have a liberal/progressive slant, it is still considered an objective, reliable source for news reporting and investigative journalism. Writers who cover both ends of the political spectrum expose readers to a variety of opinions and positions. Though Paul Krugman, an unabashed American Liberal, has a column and a blog at the NYT, Stanley Fish, a well-known and highly persuasive American conservative, is not without a dedicated space to publish his thoughts and views. Contrary to the South Korean press, the NYT cannot be categorized as touting the Democrat party line in the same way the *Hankyoreh* touts the progressive party line (whichever party that happens to be at the time).⁹

Though the press and the party may have common political interests, the press in South Korea is, contrary to political parties, highly institutionalized as a political body that communicates a consistent (and predictable) ideological position. As noted above, South Korean political parties are weak. Moreover, as a consequence of weak party institutionalization, political parties cannot be identified as representing a particular ideology; they are instead amorphous groups of politicians with similar interests. As the goal post analogy used above suggests, ideological association is a trait reserved by the press.

Although Yoon is right to identify a hand-in-glove relationship between the party and the press, it is important to clearly identify who wears the pants in the relationship; though political parties are ultimately responsible for *making* policy, the press takes on the responsibility of communicating the policy to the people, debating its appropriateness, and, once implemented, its perceived effectiveness.

However, in a system where newspapers fill the role of ideological “goal posts” it is unlikely—nay, next to impossible—for the press to report objectively. Though not a mouthpiece for a political party, as is the *People's Daily* in China and the *Rodong Sinmun* in North Korea, South Korean newspapers are not all that different, as Yoon’s press-party parallel theory indicates. Reporting by the staff of the *Chosun Ilbo* or the *Hankyoreh*, and the editorials published in the opinions section, lack in objectivity but abound in ideology. The highly politicized, ideology-

⁹ Though not the topic of this report, the notion that *Fox News* is the American equivalent of the *Chosun Ilbo* seems most appropriate. If so, *Fox News* is to the American conservative party what the *Chosun Ilbo* is to the Korean conservative party. This analogy, if correct, begs the following question: What is the difference between the *People's Daily*, the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Fox News*, and *Rodong Sinmun*, besides one newspapers overtly comical bombast and oftentimes belligerent prose?



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based disposition of the South Korean press is no better revealed than in its coverage of the Sunshine Policy during the Kim Dae-jung administration.

The Sunshine Policy and Press Coverage

The Sunshine Policy was a South Korean strategy of strategic engagement with North Korea, first proposed and implemented by President Kim Dae-jung in 1998. The policy was based on three primary principles:

- Zero tolerance for armed provocation by the North
- No policy of reunification by absorption
- An active policy of engagement with the North¹⁰

Other, secondary policies that were to be incorporated later include:

- Large transfers of aid with no expectations of, or demand for, fundamental changes in the governing structure of the North. Understood colloquially as “give now, take later” and described officially by the Kim administration as “flexible reciprocity.”
- No pressure on the North to de-nuclearize or improve its human rights conditions in the short run.

The ultimate purpose of the Sunshine Policy was to improve North-South relations in order to establish peaceful coexistence on the Korean peninsula. Progressives in South Korea, by and large, supported the policy, believing that “respect” for and engagement with North Korea was the only viable path to improving inter-Korean relations and moving beyond the anachronistic Cold War structure that still loomed over Northeast Asia at the time. Though there was little reciprocal engagement on behalf of Kim Jong-il’s regime, Kim Dae-jung pushed forward with his policy of engagement, believing that genuine progress was being made.¹¹

Conservatives, on the other hand, particularly the conservative media, were heavily critical of a policy they viewed as a no-strings-attached transfer of aid that did nothing more than

¹⁰ Moon Chung-in, though certainly not the most objective of all politically active academics in South Korea, does a relatively thorough job of explaining the basic tents and objectives of the Sunshine Policy. See his book *The Sunshine Policy: In Defense of Engagement as a Path to Peace in Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2012). See esp. chap. 1.

¹¹ See: Moon, *The Sunshine Policy*, chap. 2.



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throw a lifeline to a decrepit regime under the leadership of an oppressive dictator. Moreover, conservatives feared that the Sunshine policy endangered the ROK-US alliance, which put South Korea's security at serious risk. After limited progress was made in the first few years of Kim Dae-jung's administration, and in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis and the coming-to-power of George W. Bush, conservatives increased the intensity of anti-government criticism; the conservative papers, particularly the *Chosun Ilbo*, ratcheted up their criticism of the Sunshine Policy and the Kim Dae-jung administration.¹²

Covering the Sunshine

First of all, it is important to note, as does one report that covers government-media relations in South Korea, that "the conservatives press has never supported Kim Dae-jung throughout the ... 40 years [of his political career, at that point], and the hostility is fully reciprocated."¹³ The *Chosun Ilbo*, with its "deep, decades-long, ideology-based antagonism to Kim Dae-jung" made for a particularly tense relationship during the Sunshine years. The *Chosun Ilbo* was particularly critical of President Kim for weakening South Korea's national security through the Sunshine policy. The *Dong-a Ilbo*, the *Chosun*'s less-funded, less-read conservative cousin, though similar to the *Chosun Ilbo* in terms of ideological affiliation and opposition to Kim Dae-jung, focused more on human rights (and the lack of attention thereto). The *JoongAng Ilbo*, though relatively more moderate, also threw in its hat in with the other two conservative newspapers; though it originally supported Kim Dae-jung's engagement efforts, the fallout from the 2000 Summit meeting and the "black and white" political atmosphere forced it to take a wide-right turn. The *Hankyoreh* (*Hankyoreh Sinmun*, at the time) wholly and unequivocally supported Kim Dae-jung's presidency, endorsing him in 1992 and 1997, and provided blanket support for his Sunshine Policy.¹⁴ The way in which Kim Dae-jung responded to the conservative media's coverage of his engagement strategy reveals many familiar characteristics of South Korean politics (e.g.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Levin and Han, *Sunshine in Korea*, 71.

¹⁴ Ibid., 74-75. The summary above is supported by Hong Won Park's quantitative study, cited above, of the *Chosun Ilbo* and the *Hankyoreh*'s coverage of the Sunshine Policy. His study shows that the two papers, which represent the conservative and progressive camps, were consistent in their support (*Hankyoreh*) or opposition (*Chosun Ilbo*) of the Sunshine Policy, as revealed by the sources used by each paper and the disposition of the sources used and commentaries published.



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personalism and regionalism) but, above all else, reveals the contentious relationship between media and the government. This is the focus of the next section.

Most important to note is that the *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh's* framing of the policy remained consistent throughout Kim Dae-jung's presidency, even during periods when events "might have had a significant impact on the implementation of ... policy" (e.g. the June 2000 North-South Summit, the 2000 naval clashes in the West Sea).¹⁵ In other words, the South Korean press' coverage of government policy is impervious to political, social, or economic conditions. This should not be surprising though if one views the South Korean press as a political body that is highly ideological and institutionally biased, filling the traditional role of political parties in democratic societies.

Case Study: Kim Dae-jung's 2001 Tax Audit

Many hoped that with the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997, the state would end its coercive relationship with the media and start a new chapter of press freedom in South Korea. After all, Kim Dae-jung (hereafter "DJ") actually wrote newspaper articles calling for South Korea's transition to a liberal democracy (which necessitates press freedom uninhibited by the state) and was a longtime political opponent of South Korea's historically oppressive conservative establishment. Moreover, just two days after DJ was elected, he agreed to pardon two conservative ex-dictators who had tried to kill him, in a gesture of reconciliation that was "aimed at uniting the country politically."¹⁶ Thus, it even seemed possible that DJ might be able to put the bitter past behind him and lead South Korea past some of the regional tensions and personalistic politics that have historically plagued the South Korean political system and hindered party institutionalization. Ultimately, however, South Korea's regional cleavages and highly personalistic politics were actually exacerbated during DJ's presidency, and the state-media relationship during this period—examined in this paper via a case study of DJ's 2001 tax audit—served as the highly visible public medium through which these problems were reinforced.

One of the main points of contention between DJ and the conservative press was his "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with North Korea, which was viewed with widespread

¹⁵ Park, "The Press and the Kim Dae Jung Government's Sunshine Policy," 322.

¹⁶ Pollack, Andrew. "New Korean Leader Agrees to Pardon of 2 Ex-Dictators." *New York Times*, December 21, 1997.



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suspicion and disapproval in South Korea's conservative circles. Although DJ had won the 1997 presidential election by forming a coalition with Kim Jong-pil's far right United Liberal Democrats, he initially sought to gain the trust, and perhaps eventually the support, of some conservatives regarding the Sunshine policy. Thus, in an attempt to allay some of the conservatives' suspicion and disapproval of the policy, DJ pledged that the Sunshine Policy would be transparent, and he appointed well-known conservatives to key posts, including Kang In-duk as the Minister of Unification and Lee Jong Chan as the Director of the National Intelligence Agency. Nevertheless, the conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Dong-a Ilbo* - the three biggest newspapers that disproportionately dominate the market - continuously criticized DJ and his Sunshine Policy from the onset of his presidency.¹⁷ DJ's historically contentious relationship with these conservative papers, especially the *Chosun Ilbo*, was certainly a factor in the ardent criticism of the policy, since the newspapers gave it almost no time before they started to criticize it. Moreover, they criticized DJ directly for being "naïve" and of having questionable political leanings. In this regard, the three newspapers not only exacerbated South Korea's personalistic politics by questioning DJ's character instead of providing objective analysis of the policy, they also served to deepen the regional divide. Public opinion polls during DJ's Sunshine era revealed markedly different levels of support for the policy based on the region that the poll was conducted. For example, in the Honam region—DJ's support base - public support for the government's handling of the Sunshine Policy was extremely high, but in the rival Yongnam region, support was well below 50 percent.¹⁸

In response to these widely publicized, consistent criticisms from the conservative press, DJ apparently decided that he was going to fight back, even if he had to use coercive methods against the press that he had once decried as a dissident and opposition leader. Thus, according to Seong Han-yong, a political reporter covering the Blue House for the progressive, pro-government *Hankyoreh* newspaper, DJ and his administration started plotting retaliation for the critical coverage. A senior Blue House official reportedly told Seong in November 1998 that, "We will crush the *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Segye Ilbo* immediately. The *Chosun Ilbo* will also receive a similar fate within two to three months. We will turn the media upside down, using an NTS

¹⁷ Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, "Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate Over Policies Toward North Korea," RAND Corporation, 2002, 71-74. Numerous other conservative newspapers also criticized the Sunshine Policy, but the emphasis here is especially on the "Big Three."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



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investigation into inheritance tax.”¹⁹ Although the validity of this alleged quote may be disputed, it’s important to remember that several aspects of this retaliatory plot did come to fruition. In a case the following year that aroused “suspicions about the government’s motives,” Hong Seok-hyun, the owner of *JoongAng Ilbo*, was jailed and ordered to pay a \$3.2 million fine on tax-evasion charges. Kim Young-hie, the vice president at the *JoongAng Ilbo*, said the case represents “a warning” to media owners who might oppose the government.²⁰ Moreover, an NTS investigation into inheritance taxes did eventually lead to massive fines imposed on the big three conservative newspapers, as well as some jail time for certain conservative newspaper executives, making it highly likely that Seong’s allegations are mostly accurate. A more detailed examination of the timeline of events (below) leading up to the tax audit, as well as it’s aftermath, further demonstrates the negative impact of hostile state-media relations on regional cleavages and personalistic politics, thus weakening party institutionalization in South Korea.

In 2000, several significant events changed the discourse regarding the Sunshine Policy. In an apparent effort to overcome the conservative newspapers’ criticism of the Sunshine Policy, which constantly threatened to undermine DJ’s political support from the South Korean public, DJ decided to form a new party in January 2000 called the Millennium Democratic Party. This decision, as well as some of DJ’s subsequent political maneuvers done in an attempt to bolster the new party, had significantly negative implications for South Korea’s party institutionalization:

Having made this decision and founded the MDP, Kim worked hard to induce members of the other parties to defect and join his new party. He also encouraged progressive NGOs to support the MDP and cooperate with the government in seeking to change South Korea’s politics and culture more broadly. As a down payment, the president endorsed the campaign by a large coalition of civic groups and NGOs to blacklist “corrupt” or “unfit” politicians.²¹

¹⁹ Song Dong-hoon, “Book Confirms Tax Probe Into Media Planned by Govt,” *Chosun Ilbo*, October 25, 2001, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2001/10/25/2001102561198.html

²⁰ Kirk, “Media War in South Korea.”

²¹ Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, “Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate Over Policies Toward North Korea,” RAND Corporation, 2002, 96.



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Of course, the conservative GNP and ULD parties were enraged because they saw this as an underhanded attack before the upcoming National Assembly elections. Whereas DJ had previously sought broad political support for the Sunshine Policy, this attempt to gain seats in the National Assembly would give him greater power to make decisions unilaterally, especially regarding the Sunshine Policy. Indeed, on the day that DJ formed his new party (January 19, 2000) he publicly announced that he was going to seek a North-South summit if the MDP did well in the upcoming National Assembly elections in April.

Although conservatives interpreted this as DJ's selfish pursuit of his personal political goal of rapprochement with the North, the MDP did exceptionally well in the National Assembly election: it won 115 seats, and more importantly, the party won districts in almost every region of the country (except for southeast Yongnam), which made the party a national power and served to rebuke the conservative criticism of the Sunshine Policy.²² In this sense, it's important to emphasize that the conservative newspapers that constantly criticized the Sunshine Policy were not reflecting public sentiment about the policy, since the South Korean public significantly supported the MDP in the National Assembly election.

DJ followed through on his pledge to have a summit with the North, and in June the historic summit and joint declaration marked a milestone in inter-Korean relations. The divide between DJ's supporters and the conservative detractors began to intensify in the wake of the summit and the big three conservative newspapers were even more critical than before.²³ After DJ was awarded the Nobel Prize later that year, in large part for his efforts to engage the North, the divide between DJ supporters and detractors continued to grow while the conservative newspaper criticism intensified.

In January the following year, DJ announced that South Korea needed media reform, which the *Hankyoreh* had long advocated. On January 31, he announced that all South Korean news organizations were going to be audited, which garnered support from smaller newspapers and the People's Coalition for Media Reform (PCMR), a group of 40 civil society organizations established in 1998 to pursue media reform in South Korea. The PCMR advocated reforms such as the separation of editor's rights from the control of the newspaper owners, and proposed

²² Doh-jong Kim and Hyung-joon Kim, "Analysis of the 16th National Assembly Election," *Korea Focus*, Vol. 8, No. 3, May-June 2000, 2.

²³ Assessment based on archival newspaper research of conservative newspaper coverage.



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legislation that would restrict the proportion of shares that any family could hold in a newspaper to 30 percent, since many critics of the big papers call them “biased vehicles for the views of hereditary owners who force their opinions not only on their editors and reporters but also on the public.”²⁴ The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) also supported DJ’s push for media reform and rejected claims that a tax probe of major newspapers was a politically motivated attempt to intimidate or silence the conservative newspapers’ criticism of DJ and his Sunshine Policy.

Of course, the conservative newspapers, especially the Big Three, disagreed, and they gained the support of several international media organizations and watch groups in their criticism of the tax audit. The World Association of Newspapers and the World Editors Forum explained why they thought the tax audit was politically motivated:

We remain concerned about the apparent political motivation of the investigation and its negative impact on press freedom. The massive investigation of media companies, and not other industries, leads us to conclude that this is a tactic aimed at silencing government critics rather than correcting business practices in South Korea.²⁵

Ultimately, the results of the audit revealed that 23 news media organizations and owners concealed between 1995 and 2000 an aggregate income of about \$1 billion (U.S.) and were assessed a total of \$388.9 million in back taxes and penalties. The Korean Fair Trade Commission added fines for alleged unfair trading practices of \$18.6 million on 16 of the news media firms.²⁶ About \$200 million in penalties were levied against *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-a Ilbo* and *JoongAng Ilbo*, which represented a disproportionate amount of financial burden aimed at DJ’s biggest critics. Moreover, three executives from critical conservative newspapers were also arrested and jailed: Bang Sang-Hoon, president of the *Chosun Ilbo*, Kim Byung-Kwan, joint owner of *Dong-a Ilbo* and Cho Hee-Joon, who controls *Kookmin Ilbo*.

²⁴ Don Kirk, “South Korea ‘Reformists’ Assail Conservative Papers,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2001, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/20/news/20iht-media_ed2_.html

²⁵ Arnold Zeitlin, “South Korean probe of newspapers raises serious free-press questions,” *Freedom Forum*, July 10, 2001,

<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=14359&printerfriendly=1>

²⁶ *Ibid.*



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The *Chosun Ilbo* responded with an editorial alleging a political motivation to coerce the conservative newspapers, stating that the newspapers “were constantly told to cooperate, and the government spent great effort trying to appease our critical tone...when these attempts failed, it was clearly decided that the rest of this government's term would be spent using the tax investigation card.”²⁷

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the tax audit was that DJ appointed people from Honam, his power base, to top posts within the National Tax Service in advance in order to lead the tax audit.²⁸ In light of the numerous problems highlighted throughout this report, a multifaceted policy recommendation is needed. First, South Korea needs a progressive counterweight to the conservative newspapers. The estimates vary, but around the time of the audit, the *Chosun Ilbo* had a circulation of about 2.5 million, followed by the *Dong-a Ilbo* with 1.9 and the *JoongAng Ilbo* not far behind. The progressive *Hankyoreh* newspaper had less than a million. Progressives and liberals in South Korea need to gather funds and either bolster the *Hankyoreh* or start a viable contender to balance the overwhelming conservative views of the newspapers in circulation. In addition to the progressive counterweight, public taxes should be utilized to create a non-partisan newspaper that provides contending perspectives on issues in an even manner so that the public can hear all sides of the debate instead of the view espoused by one newspaper’s editorial staff.

Furthermore, there must be a non-partisan, independent body that is responsible for carrying out tax audits of all companies, especially media organizations. The tax audit has been used as a coercive tool of state power on more than one occasion, and it’s clear that politically motivated tax audits can serve as highly public displays of contentious state-media relations, which can exacerbate existing problems. Any political decision that impacts the way that the media covers politics needs to be subject to an independent, non-partisan review and announced to the public before that decision is implemented.

In conclusion, this case provides obvious examples of personalistic politics and regional divisions that are exacerbated by highly publicized, easily observable relations between the state and the (print) media. DJ’s inability or unwillingness to pursue the Sunshine Policy via broad

²⁷ “Freedom Forum Reports On Media Arrests,” *Chosun Ilbo*, August 19, 2001, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2001/08/19/2001081961135.html

²⁸ Song Dong-hoon, “Book Confirms Tax Probe Into Media Planned by Govt,” *Chosun Ilbo*, October 25, 2001, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2001/10/25/2001102561198.html



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political support, especially in the midst of heavy criticism from conservative newspapers, motivated him to start a new political party, persuade other politicians to switch parties to join him, and support a blacklist of certain candidates in the National Assembly race. If South Korea wants to deepen its democracy by maintaining consistent political parties with consistent ideological and policy platforms, it needs to address the numerous problems in state-media relations by implementing the policy recommendations mentioned above.

Implications and Conclusions

What are the implications for a political system with weak political parties and a strong press that represents the ideological “goal posts” in society and fills the role of articulating and debating public policy? Though largely unexplored, because it has been all but uncovered, there appears to be a breakdown in, or absence of, the “public sphere.”²⁹ If the press is understood as an institution responsible for framing issues and constructing social reality, what are the broader policymaking implications?

There are two views on this issue: 1) If the public sphere, controlled and created by “private” organizations (e.g. the press), represents a forum through which rational debate can occur, then newspapers with highly politicized agendas and a teeth to lips relationship with political parties can be seen as distorting this space. As a consequence, very little policy-debate occurs; 2) Alternatively, the “party-press parallel” can be understood as a boundary-setting mechanism. The conservative media defines one extreme, while the progressive media defines the polar opposite. Rather than hindering public debate, it simply defines the boundaries wherein debate can take place by other means.

Whether a bona fide public sphere exists may not, however, be the principal issue at stake regarding the state of South Korea’s democracy and government-society relations, which even more so than government-media relations, is the most important relationship in a democracy. Though newspapers may effectively communicate the conservative or progressive position on a

²⁹ The public sphere is, in the Western liberal discourse, understood as the space between the government and the people filled by a group of well-educated skeptics, who, collectively, are best described as the press. Their role is, according to Jurgen Habermas, the scholar most commonly associated with the public sphere as a concept, to challenge the authority and power of the government for the good of the people and the betterment of society. See: Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).



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given issue, the press is not the political body responsible for making policy; that responsibility, despite its lack of institutionalization, still belongs to political parties. And until political parties are able to establish themselves as ideologically differentiated and permanent political bodies, South Korea's democracy is likely to remain unconsolidated and the government's responsiveness to the people's collective grievances institutionally hindered. It may so happen that when South Korean political parties become institutionalized (it is best to be optimistic regarding such matters), the role of the press will be forced to change. However, given recent events surrounding the selection of a candidate for the Democratic United Party (DUP) for the recent presidential election, it seems that party institutionalization is unlikely to happen anytime soon and the press' traditional role as ideological goal posts is to remain.³⁰

³⁰ See: Steven Denney, "Personality Politics Stifle Korean Democracy," *Asia Times*, October 30, 2012, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NJ30Dg01.html>.